

DUXBURY MARINER

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Rare Bird Albino Robin Visits Duxbury

By Lilly Cleveland

Did you happen to see the rare bird hopping on the lawn in front of the library several weeks ago? From July 22 to 24 there was an incomplete albino American robin pulling earthworms alongside his flockmates. The robin was completely white with the exception of a red breast and dark eyes. Even his legs were pink.

According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, partial albinism is "fairly uncommon." Complete albinos are very rare in the wild. Birds with this malady are easily detected by predators and often chased out by members of their own flock. Consequently, they do not survive long.

This particular robin suffered a "genetic malfunctioning" of the dark pigments known as melanins. These are chemical compounds that are synthesized by the bird and are

found in the skin and feathers. Melanins produce brown and black coloration. Feathers that have no pigment reflect the light back as white. Carotenoids are responsible for colored



This incomplete albino robin is all white except for his red breast and dark eyes.

Photo by Lilly Cleveland

feathers (reds and yellows) and are derived from foods. This robin had sufficient carotenoid levels, which explains the red breast feathers. Birds can have one system shut down

(melanins) while the other pig-menting system operates normally. Another example is the downy woodpecker, documented as having lost all color except the red spot on the back of the head.

The American robin is a member of the thrush family. Robins are migratory, but it is also common to see large flocks winter-over in our area. I have seen as many as 30 robins feeding on sumac in January. They are adaptable in their feeding habits and can switch from earthworms to berries when the snow covers the ground. Robins flock together and share communal roosts at night. Male robins share communal roosts all year, returning to their nest sites during the day during breeding season.

Watch for wintering flocks of robins. They are not usually feeder birds but may eat bread, halved apples, raisins or suet.